

# Towards humble geographies

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This paper outlines the potential for a more “humble geography.” Most of us have been awed in some way by the world, humbled, but how often is that reflected in our work as geographers? As a thinking tool, “humble geographies” can combine insights and ethics from posthuman and feminist philosophies, participatory action research, and situated knowledges. Humility could helpfully contribute in debates seeking to improve geographic research practice. Humility, a quiet virtue, has potential to inspire change in the ways we relate with others and our institutions. Drawing on research experiences in the high Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, I give some examples of humble geographies in practice that raise questions about the ideal balance between authority and humility. How can we be humble in the face of rising pressures to sell ourselves and our research as highly impactful and important – in short, anything but humble? My aim is to open a discussion as to how we can helpfully inject more humility into our work.

## KEYWORDS

humble geographies, humility, knowledge production, neoliberal university, research ethics, Svalbard

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

I was humbled by the cold, but it was humility that caught me unawares and cut the social ice. There was one character in Svalbard, “Jörgen,” several people had suggested I speak with but who was not responding. In an interview with “Tor,” Jörgen's name cropped up again. Tor prompted me to try Jörgen once more. This time he responded and, when we finally met, I learnt Tor had recommended me to him, saying I was a nice, “humble person.” Jörgen agreed with Tor and gave me another contact.

After the gratification of being attributed such a virtue subsided, I recalled many instances where I had surely failed to practise humility and later reflected on how this mode of snowballing was not always optimal. However, this series of encounters got me thinking about the idea of being humble as a geographer, thoughts that followed me from Svalbard to Wales and back again. Sometimes the idea of practising a “humble geography” felt resonant with my approach and inspiring; other times it felt utterly naïve and induced a wave of cynicism. This was surely a concept that would, like slow scholarship, be at odds with the competitive, increasingly neo-liberal, “ANYTHING BUT GENTLE” (Horton, 2020) academic environment. The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) and its international equivalents drive us to make bolder claims, produce more “impact,” and frame our work against measures of excellence, which we are expected to produce more and more of, more efficiently (Berg et al., 2016; Castree, 2006; Mountz et al., 2015). Yet there were glimmers of hope to be found within participatory action research. These scholars (see for example Pain et al., 2011) show it is possible to combine societal impact with sensitive, appropriate research methodologies and progressive politics. There is also

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potential to practise research “humbly” while creating “impact” as well as bolstering micro-politics of resistance to neo-liberalisation.

In keeping with its namesake, “humble geographies” are not positioned as grand new theory; rather, in step with Katz's minor theory, I seek to forge solidarity between a number of similar approaches and open up further “spaces of betweenness” that can help in “thinking and acting differently” (Katz, 2017, p. 597) through the addition of humility. The paper begins by exploring the notion of humbleness. Drawing out the connections between posthumanism; participative, situated, reflexive approaches; and vital, gentle, slow, and kind geographies, I suggest how humble geography could contribute, and its possible limitations. My experiences researching frameworks of value in Svalbard illustrate versions of “humble geographies” in practice and in becoming. The emerging broad manifesto suggests potential ways forwards for humble geographic practice.

## 2 | EXPLORING HUMILITY AND HUMBLENESS

While seeing and hearing “humble opinions” and groaning at “humble brags” could be everyday experiences, humility has until recently been a “quiet virtue.” Being humble has been gaining traction in corporate culture and leadership studies (Maldonado et al., 2018) but previously has garnered limited research attention in philosophical, personality, and psychology spheres (Bhattacharya et al., 2017; Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Holland, 2013; Tangney, 2009). In part this could be due to its association with religion (Tangney, 2009) and a Western European cultural “obsession with an individualist model of masculinity with its roots in honor, pride, and physical strength” (Holland, 2013, p. 132), which clashes with the idea of humility as a virtue at all. Another contributing factor for such “quietness” has been difficulties in measurement and definition of humility, making it a slippery topic to address. However, recent reviews from moral psychology and organisational studies suggest emerging agreement as to the characteristic traits and hallmarks that a humble person might demonstrate. Common to several reviews are: remaining teachable and open to new ideas; recognising and appreciating others; having a low focus on the self; and an awareness of a larger perspective (Bhattacharya et al., 2017; Chancellor &

Lyubomirsky, 2013; Maldonado et al., 2018; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). The most commonly cited trait is a willingness to assess oneself accurately.

According to the philosopher Garcia (2006, p. 434), to be humble suggests being “moderately unimpressed” with ourselves. Philosophical discussions add a greater focus on personal limitations but likewise highlight the importance of self-knowledge and awareness (Comte-Sponville, 2002; Garcia, 2006; Kupfer, 2003). To avoid being arrogant, or overly self-demeaning (one can go too far), individuals require a balanced, realistic, accurate sense of themselves. Having a “true” picture of ourselves, performing a “goddess trick” of transparent reflexivity (Rose, 1997), is always out of reach, but it is the *willingness* to judge ourselves fairly that is deemed essential to humility.

As a moral perspective, Kupfer (2003) argues that humility orients us towards the world and others. It can be seen as a practice and an ideal to work towards through social comparison, recognising our interdependence, and “objective valuation” of things that are important and valuable besides ourselves, “such as the achievements of science and art, and the splendour of nature” (Kupfer, 2003, p. 256).

In personality, psychological, and organisational studies, humility is almost exclusively found to be a “good thing.” Being humble (or at least being observed or reported as acting in humble ways) is positively associated with productivity at work, academic performance, and emotional well-being (Bhattacharya et al., 2017; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). As Bhattacharya et al. summarise their interpretations of religious teachings from different faiths and traditional Indian philosophy, “humility serves as the underpinning of a healthy social structure facilitating happiness in the individual life. It promotes equality of opportunity and freedom of speech and opinion in social life” (2017, p. 2).

Yet humility presents a paradox as “a contradictory virtue .... ‘I am very humble’ is a performative self-contradiction” (Comte-Sponville, 2002, p. 158). There is “something quite ‘odd’ in proclaiming ‘I am humble’” (Garcia, 2006, p. 427). But if self-awareness is fundamental to humility, how does this work if we believe we are humble? Kupfer (2003) answers by returning to the de-emphasised self: a humble person's gaze is directed outwards rather than paying attention to their own virtues, even if they are aware of them. Encompassed in this attention to others is awareness of a higher moral ideal, which a humble person would recognise they have not attained. Conceiving of humility as a practice is necessary in this solution. Indeed, personality researchers are beginning to move from understanding humility as a possessed character trait towards conceptualising humility as a practised state with connected behaviours (Chancellor & Lyubomirsky, 2013), relational “doings” with others (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018) that are contextually contingent. This move towards a more relational understanding of humility offers an opportunity for geographers to deploy their skills investigating how embodied, social, cultural, and environmental processes co-create spaces of humility: geographies of humility perhaps?

## 2.1 | Connecting and converse concepts

Modesty centres on following social norms of self-presentation, rather than also incorporating a relational perspective to the world (Bhattacharya et al., 2017), so is more narrowly defined than humility. Modesty requires someone to *underestimate* their role, as in Haraway's (1997) scientist as “modest witness,” whereas a willingness to *accurately assess* one's role, performance, or skill is seen as necessary for humility.

Vulnerability is tightly connected to being humble. Like humility when associated with low self-esteem, vulnerability can be seen as a weakness (Harrison, 2008). It can also be an asset – allowing us to more fully explore, be alive with, in, and *to* the world (Ingold, 2011) as open, receptive (Wiles, 2011), and empathetic researchers. In a paper entitled “Researcher, analyze thyself,” Saldana advocates for “humble vulnerability”:

Being a qualitative researcher means humble vulnerability – open to empathic understanding, open to other people's fragilities and idiosyncrasies, open to messy collaboration, and open to being wrong. Humbly vulnerable to being utterly confused and so awash in data that you have no idea where to begin or what direction to take ... (2018, p. 6)

Familiar feelings and experiences. But, humble vulnerability *must* not be solely the domain of qualitative research.

Lacking traits considered as opposite to humility – such as arrogance or narcissism – is frequently taken to be an indicator for humbleness. These absences seem necessary but not sufficient conditions for humble behaviour: the relational, outward-looking, beyond-self perspective associated with humility may still be wanting (Nielsen & Marrone, 2018; Tangney, 2009). Pride could also be considered in this way. However, as Bhattacharya et al. (2017) discuss, valuing accomplishments without being boastful or overly confident can be part of attempting fair self-assessment.

Many of the traits outlined above as contributing to humility resonate with tenets of good research practice: being open-minded and teachable, recognising others' roles, being outward-looking with a larger-than-self-perspective, and being willing to accurately assess our limitations, positions, and knowledge (or lack thereof). They also rub up against the authority we are increasingly asked to convey as knowledge producers and disseminators within a neo-liberal environment. Think, for example, of the certainty expected within grant applications for future research projects.

Citation provides an insight into the tensions between humility and authority. This practice requires gratitude and recognition of others' work and ideas. It requires a degree of humility. Citations also produce authority through signalling how much reading has been done and contribute to valuation metrics. As Mott and Cockayne argue, citation "works as a performative technology of power" (2017, p. 969) through which writers aggrandise certain work and authors over others, helping reproduce inequalities and exclusions within academic institutions and disciplines (Noxolo, 2017). Citations only go part way to recognising our "radical dependence" as academics (Kupfer, 2003). Ingold asks "why do we acknowledge only our textual sources but not the ground we walk, the ever-changing skies, mountains, rivers, rocks and trees, the houses we inhabit and the tools we use...?" (2011, p. xii). The increasing recognition of research collaborators (Cook et al., 2008), assemblages (Fox & Alldred, 2015), work in animal geographies (Buller, 2015), and vibrant materialist research (Tolia-Kelly, 2013) begins to respond to Ingold's provocation. Yet the question of how geographers can bring more humility into this aspect of our practice remains a productive one. Ought we let go of claiming authorship in a straightforward, linear way altogether, for example?

### 3 | HUMBLE WAYS OF KNOWING

[T]he world intervenes in our knowledge; it exceeds our descriptions of it by confronting us with the sheer messy, slippery, surprising business of living in it. (Pryke et al., 2003, p. 65)

Using generalised theory within this messy world (Law, 2004) can be a humbling experience. In my research, the amorphous realm of value theories has been both inspirational and seemingly impossible. Woodyer and Geoghegan (2013), aided by Latour (1988) and Gibson-Graham (2008), have encouraged a move towards weaker theory and description. Similarly, in folklore studies Noyes (2008) proposes "humble theory" as a middle ground between grand theory and local interpretation/description. Katz (1996, 2017) has argued for working with "minor theory." Minor theory rejects mastery and embraces lively, messy, embodied, material, and positioned theories, and resonates strongly with how I imagine a humble geographic theoretical engagement. These moves share a sense of humility, recognise that all-encompassing theory is beyond us, and see value and political power in smaller, "in-between," uncomfortable, and multiple theoretical contributions.

As envisioned here, a humble geography engages with and draws on more-than-human, participative, vulnerable, and experimental approaches. It incorporates epistemologies that de-centre humans and take other species, places, and material things seriously (for example, Anderson & Wylie, 2009; Anderson et al., 2010; Latour, 2004). It assumes an expansive approach to human knowledge whereby emotions, non-representational, embodied experiences, and affects can contribute to our understandings of processes and practices around us (Anderson, 2009; Bondi, 2005). Humble geography recognises the power and limitations of social constructions, treating reality as both social and material (Law & Urry, 2004), rather than a singular truth to uncover.

These theoretical insights question the notion of research as discovery (Massey, 2003). Shifts towards encountering "lively matter," taking other than human, material thingnesses into account, distributing agency and value more widely, all destabilise our certainty. Claims to knowledge are no longer absolute but provide some of many possible perspectives. For Bennett, this chastens "fantasies of human mastery" (2010, p. 122) and thus has a humbling effect that can reshape the self and potentially change the way a researcher works.

Ethically, posthumanism is an essential corrective to an arrogant Anglo-European worldview where resultant actions degrade living environments of most known and, likely, unknown species (as Yusoff (2013) points out, our knowledge is limited). It recognises that we are dependent on nonhuman nature to survive and thrive (Clark, 2010). Thrift's (2005) posthuman research ethics values the messiness and wonder of the world, abandoning the aim to "conquer" through the expansion of knowledge and power. Recognising our flaws and ignorances as a species also draws attention to injustices and inequalities (Holland, 2013), such as the lack of attention to alternative and non-colonial ways of knowing (Sundberg, 2014).

This openness to numerous approaches, kinds of knowledge, ways of generating “data” and telling stories (Rose, 2016) maps onto the lively uncertainty and the impossibility of accounting for everything a humble research approach suggests. Recognition of the resources, actors, infrastructures, and positionalities that contribute to knowledge production enacts humility by pointing us towards and placing us within the messy world we research.

## 4 | HUMBLE WAYS OF WORKING

Nagar (2014) builds on the concept of situated knowledge (Rose, 1997) and encourages “situated solidarities,” advocating a “radical vulnerability” that recognises researchers have relative privileges, strengths, and weaknesses. By embracing the possibility of “failure” and suspending our egos and identities, she argues it is also possible to develop cross-ideological or cross-political solidarities (Nagar, 2014).

Situated solidarity connects with long-running discussions on reflexivity, co-production, and shifting research relationships carried out by fallible researchers with multiple and changing identities (e.g., Fois, 2017; Sultana, 2007). The notion of the humble researcher also takes on board Moser's suggestion that personality can affect the research process just as social categories such as class, gender, and nationality do: “we bring different internal qualities and various emotional abilities to our fieldwork that have an impact on the knowledges we create” (Moser, 2008, p. 390). Participatory action researchers in particular have written about the emotional entanglements of engaging with co-productive research that works collaboratively for social change (Askins, 2009). Such projects not only work *with* communities but also contest traditional knowledge production and aim to give back (Cahill, 2007).

While participatory, co-productive, vulnerable, situated research approaches align with the conceptual basis for a humble geography, at first pass the drive for action is not apparent within a traditional notion of humility. However, listening and being present with others provides a form of validation to otherwise everyday living (Pottinger, 2020; Saldana, 2018) that can (gently) instigate change. Moreover, a core facet of humility discussed above is an outward-looking focus. Looking out at unequal and in-crisis societies is more than likely to inspire action. We live by multiple values, virtues, and identities. Being humble does not preclude engaging other virtues such as courage in order to pursue positive social change.

### 4.1 | Gently, slowly, with kindness?

While I have been slowly ruminating over humility, fellow geographers have been discussing the potential for “gentle geographies” (Finn, 2016). Gladly, much common ground is now evident – being gentle and being humble often go hand-in-hand. As Kupfer observes, recognising our own flaws and limitations, as part of humble practice, “makes us merciful and gentle with other people” (2003, p. 260). Horton, squarely critiques the ANYTHING-BUT-GENTLE<sup>1</sup> neoliberal academy by adding to a growing body of realistic reflections on experiences of everyday academia and “encourages an ethics of considerate, generous *humility*” (2020, p. 2; original emphasis). Pottinger's (2020) reflections on a gentle methodology that is equally attuned to embodied research relationships and a careful, considerate “rendering” of the resultant research materials is likewise in tune with what I perceive a humble approach to be. A similar convergence of ideas is evident in the call from Dorling (2019) for geographers to “be kind,” accept our (personal and disciplinary) failures and weaknesses, and combat “academic arrogance” and superiority.<sup>2</sup>

Humble geography also connects with the notion of slow scholarship (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Mountz et al., 2015). Keighren observes the potential of this relation: “With time, in both our research and our writing, we gain humility and perspective” (2017, p. 641). In many areas of life, we are noticing the detriments of faster paced living (Honoré, 2005). Knowledge is not always easily and efficiently produced. Slow scholarship puts “time to think” front and centre: sometimes we need thorough, long, pondering engagements with a research topic, community, or project intellectually and institutionally (Massey, 2002). Slowing down resists the “tyranny of the immediate” (Massey, 2002, p. 259) that encourages us to speed up, tick boxes, and “publish or perish”; it leaves time for finding questions as well as, or instead of, answers. Slowness allows time for “working with care while also caring for ourselves and others” (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1253).

Each strand – gentleness, slowness, kindness, humility – lends more tools, capacities, and attunements to work and think with in efforts to progress the discipline and wider academy. Thankfully, these are not “either/or” positions; these strands can weave together a stronger fabric. It *matters* what ideas, concepts, and knowledges we choose to think with (Haraway, 2016). I argue here that humbleness affords particular emphasis on interdependency, honest self-assessment, and maintaining an outwards perspective and expansive awareness of limitations. These are practices that ground us and our theories in place.



## 5 | HUMBLE WAYS OF BEING IN PLACE

In Svalbard, mistakes and improper preparations could have dire consequences. I was dependant on help and advice from the start. Seasons, weather, and avalanche warnings needed accounting for. Rough seas, snow storms, ice melt, and people being on holidays at unexpected times could all disrupt best laid plans.

Although polar bears are an exciting and charismatic resident, the threat they pose to human life is very real. If I was to leave the safety of town, I might need to shoot to kill with a high-calibre rifle and be able to prove that it was necessary to avoid being prosecuted. Learning to shoot meant easing up on long-held passivist principles and a reframing of priorities. The occasional check over the shoulder and the weight of a hired rifle were everyday reminders that our species is not fully in control.

This lack of control is always already the case. Svalbard, while exceptional in many ways, is my example case as it is in relation to this place I experienced my “doctoral becoming” (Carter et al., 2018, p. 485). Inserting oneself into the “place of interest’s” assemblage through research brings the realities of that context to the fore. As black coal lays starkly on snow, Svalbard can have an uncanny knack of making obscured truths patently obvious. A humble approach to geography lingers on and learns from such place-based idiosyncrasies and the specific encounters of research.

Situated solidarity in this context meant suppressing my environmentalist identity. In order to be open to a range of views held within Svalbard’s communities – many had very different ideas about mining, hunting, and climate change to myself – I tried to put aside prior judgements. This openness and active cultivation of empathy with differing positions built a sense of trust making it easier to ask, gently and politely, the harder questions. However, despite my snowballing success with Jörgen and others, being humble was not always a productive strategy. I initially adopted a participatory approach and used open-ended invitations encouraging potential collaborators to shape the direction, methods, and outputs of the research. These requests were not very successful. Being unable to spend an extended period of time in Svalbard to develop relationships (slow is not always practical), a humble approach in this case meant listening, learning, and going back to the drawing board. A more direct, self-confident, even authoritative invitation was far more effective. For my subsequent trips, I presented a clear idea of the research project (despite this being in-process) and how participants’ insights could be valuable, and emphasised that I had visited Svalbard before. Interviews could then proceed in a more recognisably “humble” manner.

Returning to Svalbard as a postdoctoral fellow, aiming to increase the impact and usefulness of my research to the communities there, I wondered how a humble approach might continue. Offering opportunities for feedback on transcripts, papers, or reports, through public presentations, exhibitions, or online platforms are ways I tried to remain “humbly vulnerable to the possibility” that my “opinion doesn’t matter” and my “interpretation is incorrect” (Saldana, 2018, p. 6). There is potential to add humility to our writing and to “generate critical interpretations and readings of the world that are accessible and easy to understand” (Routledge & Derickson, 2015, p. 398). A humble approach might ask what kind of involvement and impact participants would hope for. For example, a policy report can be more meaningful through dialogue that identifies report users and the most helpful formats or forums it could be delivered in. This ongoing openness has contextual limitations, not least time and funding, but it can increase the likelihood of positive impact and public engagement.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

The theoretical and practical suggestions discussed above are not novel. However, collated as “humble geography” they become a more cohesive set of ideals to work towards. A humble epistemology, as suggested here, embraces being part of the world rather than its master. It is open to being affected by objects and beings, and to the different limitations, knowledges, relations, and identities that openness can bring. A humble researcher is willing to tell backstories, hold theories and research “goals” in proxy, and embrace the accompanying “mess” and failures (Harrowell et al., 2018). They are willing to concede their shortcomings and the partial, contingent nature of the knowledge they co-produce. They remain teachable, motivated to improve, develop, and continue to question how we tell research stories and share co-produced knowledge in ways that reflect a humble position without becoming an invisible witness.

Humble geographies do not need to be weak or unnoticeable. Humility does not necessarily lead us to mediocrity or inaction, but it asks us to think about research differently. It can be a useful tactic that we can be more transparent about employing in different ways, but, more than this, practising being humble is a “good thing” (Bhattacharya et al., 2017; Nielsen & Marrone, 2018). As well as changing the way others relate to you – as in the opening example – it can also profoundly affect embodied values. Yet, there are tricky balances between authority and humility to be negotiated.

Taking a humble approach into the academy, or indeed anywhere, may appear to be a risky strategy. We surely want to be perceived as “smart” (Saldana, 2018) and narrate our achievements with dramatic gusto to win that next grant or position (Horton, 2020). Yet, perhaps this is precisely the first place we should experiment with being courageously humble? Fostering solidarity, care, and humility is not an impossible project of creative resistance. A humble attitude towards academic practice may also provide a gentler way through troubled waters. Although humbleness does not imply guns-blazing activism, “humility is even-keeled, helping us steer steadily through the swells and troughs of satisfaction and disappointment” (Kupfer, 2003, p. 266). This steady awareness can lead us away from the ego's tendency to dramatise, leaving a quieter space to come back to our everyday, sometimes small acts of research practice or otherwise, that can and do make a difference.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The capitalised form here is Horton's (2020) idea that encapsulates a critique of what might also be described as ANYTHING-BUT-HUMBLE behaviours.

<sup>2</sup> A full discussion of the need to decolonise geography is not possible here but is taken to be an essential feature encompassed in the ideal of a “humble geography.”

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